

Gay/Lesbian Ordination – The Central States Synod Resolution

Dear Sabbatarians,

Our perusal of Seminex history will begin again next week with Ed's next chapter, "The first days at Seminex, Feb. 20, 1974ff." This week I asked Jim Squire to write about the Central States Synod Assembly which took place this past weekend. THE ISSUE of the assembly was the defrocking of a pastor who admitted to our bishop that she is in a committed relationship with another woman.

I can hear many of you groan, not wanting to look at this "hot potato" again. I sympathize. However, the fact that we find ourselves with our heads in the sand so often over these sexual issues seems to indicate that we need to continue our deliberation.

What I'd like to offer you here is the resolution that came to the assembly floor and then Jim's public response (on the assembly floor) to it. It is my opinion, at this point, that we have explored the constitutionality and biblical exegesis of this issue as far as we can right now, but that we haven't looked at the theological implications as fully as we need to. Both the resolution and Jim's response move in this direction.

If you want more background, I can forward to you Jim's thorough journal of the whole assembly, but I think for the sake of discussion, these two opinions are a good starting point.

Peace and Joy,

The resolution:

GAY AND LESBIAN PERSONS IN COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS AND IN PUBLIC MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

Background:

In the Reformation, Luther took the radical step of allowing priests to marry. In doing so he affirmed God's good gift of sexuality as expressed in a committed relationship and rejected celibacy as a "higher" calling. Luther recognized that while the Gospel is given freely to undeserving sinners, the gift of celibacy is rare indeed. It is only given to a few and it cannot be made a requirement imposed on people. Our present church discipline, requiring celibacy of gay and lesbian pastors who are called into faithful, committed, monogamous relationships contradicts Lutheran theology. According to our church discipline, pastors of gay or lesbian sexual orientation are to remain celibate. They are forced to choose between God's call to ordained ministry and God's call to be a faithful partner in a committed relationship. Our church stands in the way of their faithful response to the call of God. This creates enormous pain for the pastors involved, their partners, families, friends, and congregations. As a result, many gay and lesbian persons are alienated from our church and our witness to the Gospel.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ comes to us in our sinfulness and brokenness. Out of God's great mercy we are forgiven, justified, made right with God. All this is a gift of God to us

without any deserving on our part. This is the very heart of our faith as Lutheran Christians. In Baptism, the promise of God is given to us, and we are made members of the church. Baptism is given to all, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation.

In 1991 and again in 1995, the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA affirmed the "gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of congregations of the ELCA." This welcome has not been extended, however, to gay and lesbian pastors who are living in committed relationships. As a result, our church is removing a growing number of faithful and effective pastors from the clergy roster, because they are in committed relationships. In these cases, the ministry of the Gospel is silenced.

We in the ELCA are living a contradiction in need of resolution. We proclaim welcome to gays and lesbians and we place homosexual pastors in a terrible bind. We need to talk and listen. We need a safe time and place where all voices can be heard. We need to trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us into practice and theology which is consistent with the Gospel we proclaim. – Because the ministry of the baptized is central to the life of the church – Because the church is called to inclusiveness in its ministry – Because we believe that we must be faithful to God's calling – Because we desire open, honest, and safe dialog on this issue

Resolved:

The Central States Synod in Assembly takes the following actions:

- A. During the next seven years, the congregations of the Central States Synod enter a time of dialog, study, and*

Biblical reflection on the issues surrounding the possibility that God calls gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships to the ordained and other forms of public ministry in the church.

B. In order to provide a safe environment for gay and lesbian persons presently serving in various forms of ministry in the Central States Synod, (Ordained, Associates in Ministry, Deaconate, Parish Ministry Associates) during this time of dialog:

1. A suspension be placed on enforcing section b.4, paragraph 2 of Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline precluding "practicing homosexual persons from the ordained ministry of this church." This suspension will be in effect until lifted by Assembly, but lasting for at least seven years. Persons who have been removed under current ELCA policy would be encouraged to pursue reinstatement to the ordained and other forms of public ministry of this church.

2. A suspension be placed on discipline of congregations who issue calls to gays and lesbian pastors in committed relationships. This suspension will be in effect until lifted by Assembly, but lasting for at least seven years.

3. For the duration of these suspensions, gay and lesbian pastors and persons in other forms of public ministry in committed relationships would be expected to adhere to the same expectations of conduct required of their office as outlined in relevant documents.

C. This Assembly of the Central States Synod memorialize the ELCA at its 1999 Churchwide Assembly to adopt this same resolution on behalf of the ELCA.

Jim's response:

"I am speaking against this resolution out of what I believe to be my genuine concern for everyone on all sides of this issue. How genuine they turn out to be I leave to your judgement. I have 2 concerns about the resolution.

First,

I believe that behind the sincere, thoughtful expressions in the background lies a very popular and understandable view of a God who **never** is unreasonable in his dealings with us. We find it easier to talk about a God of hardship when it is obvious to our minds that the hardship is either deserved or at least when it is shared equally by all. Some of us, myself included, would view the hardship described in the background of this resolution as undeserved and unfair, at least from a rational point of view. Others, who believe that sexual orientation can be changed in a healthy, positive way, would, I'm guessing, not view this as an unfair hardship at all. I humbly suggest yet a third possibility: the possibility that we all – myself included – have a deeper purpose: to domesticate God, to keep God's hands clean. The same Martin Luther who is referred to in the background for this resolution, in a writing of his entitled "The Bondage of The Will", opposed such a purpose coming from a person by the name of Erasmus. It's not that he didn't understand it, or even sympathize with it. Yet, he opposed it because it is contradicted by scripture. Maybe the real problem we **all** have here is not simply with each other, but with a God whose motives are hidden (Deus Absconditus) from us. Maybe the deepest division we **all** experience is not a horizontal one but a vertical one.

Second

Thank God for what that very same God **did** reveal in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Paul put it to the

Corinthians, God made him *to be sin* *for us* – Jesus, who knew no sin, so that in us might be found the righteousness of God. If, as our Bishop rightly proclaimed, the Holy Supper is the one truly safe place for all of us to be one with each other, then I humbly suggest that the one truly safe (and truly open, I might add) place for us to talk about our sins with each other is at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. As gruesome as that might sound, it is safe precisely because of the empty tomb that comes after. If we can just meet each other at the foot of the cross, we can be freed up to talk about our sins knowing that Christ is the one who puts them to death for us. As we seek out a safe and open place to talk about these issues, let us never forget to bring the foot of the cross with us.”